BOOK REVIEW

ENID RHODES PESCHEL, Editor: *Medicine and Literature*. New York, Neale Watson Academic Publication. xix + 204 pp. $15.00.

"Literature—the most seductive, the most deceiving, the most dangerous of professions." So wrote John Morley, the redoubtable editor of the *Fortnightly Review* in his essay on Edmund Burke. Viscount Morley's father was a surgeon, but it was probably not filial piety that caused him to refrain from a similar comment on medicine as a profession. The symbiosis between medicine and literature is uneasy, and any reviewer who enters that arena must guard against John Gay's charge that "All professions berogue one another." On balance the relationship is a healthy one, on occasion even a productive one. The collection of essays in *Medicine and Literature,* all but one by literary scholars, is just such a fortunate occasion.

A sagacious preface by Edmund Pellegrino sets the stage. He tells us, "Medicine and literature are united in an unremitting paradox: the need simultaneously to stand back from, and yet to share in, the struggle for human life.... Both of them are moral experiences.... To look compassionately is the summit of artistry for both medicine and literature; to take part in the struggle is the morality they share." Dr. Pellegrino is a much valued educator, and he is perfectly lucid in his *telos:* "In a dozen medical schools courses in literature are serving several goals in unique ways: teaching empathy with the ill person, giving insight into the peculiarities of the medical life and the doctor's place in society and culture, underscoring the dilemmas of medical morals, and improving the use of narrative forms in history taking. The medical uses of literature offer some hope for buffering the encroachments of technology to which today's scientifically trained clinician seems so especially susceptible." It is a laudable aim, but there are two major caveats: Literature is more than the handmaiden of medicine, and there is no proof that exposing a medical student or young physician to literature will make him a better doctor. Many fine, decent, competent physicians are immune to literature, to music, to the fine arts. Most of the medical care delivered in this country is carried out by doctors whose reading rarely goes beyond the daily newspaper or a popular magazine. Perhaps their taste for reading was blunted by the dead impersonal style of the medical literature they were assigned in school. But one

suspects that a fair proportion have acquired an immunity to literary experience. It is a pious hope that exposing them to "good" literature will improve their manners, their morals, or their minds—a thesis one cannot prove.

But Patience to prevent that murmur soon replies that immunity can be breached, that even if a few converts are made, it is a net gain, and that surely the men and women acknowledged to be among the leaders of the profession are by and large literate, articulate, sensitive to human needs and values, even moral and upright. These are the people medical students look up to, and we must invest that mustard seed of faith in their future. A pious hope need not be a false one.

The reviewer's cliché for a collection of 23 essays is "uneven," but it is a soft impeachment and it conveys little information to the reader. The important point about these essays is that so many of them are very good. The editor has arranged them in three groups: Doctor-Writers, Doctors Portrayed in Literature, and Disease as an Altered—or Heightened—State of Consciousness. Stephen Grecco leads off with a strong essay on the doctors in Chekhov's plays as an example of Chekhov healing himself. Not healing the tuberculosis that ultimately killed him, but healing the incurable wound created by being both engaged with and detached from life at the same time, the double vision of being a doctor and a writer, yet having only one mind and one body. Raymond La Charité offers a book as therapy, the high comedy in Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel,* an inexhaustible source for good-humored perspective on the human condition long before that catchphrase was coined. Bettina Knapp's exposition of Céline's transformation from an idealistic young physician who was inspired by Semmelweis to the embittered, rancorous author of *Death on the Installment Plan* is perfectly clear about the nature of that transformation, but she does not explain why it occurred, what psychological trauma turned this sensitive writer into a nasty man. John Sena's tribute to Samuel Garth and *The Dispensary* recalls to memory a fine Augustan physician, Dryden's friend, whose satire illuminated an important issue in providing medical care for the sick poor in London at the end of the 17th century. Were today's pundits on public policy *au courant* with Garth they might not emit the dogmatic pronunciamentos that grace (or disgrace) so many of our journals.

A tightly written essay by Harold Gene Moss explains how Tobias Smollett transformed his experiences as a naval surgeon's mate in the War of Jenkyn's Ear into some of the central chapters of *Roderick Random.*

Surely, many physicians have participated in dramatic experiences under fire, but only a handful have the gift that enables them to use them as the substrate of fiction. Marie Boroff's reading of a few of William Carlos Williams' poems fails to convince us of his "diagnostic eye;" "Spring and All" seems more a description of the northern New Jersey landscape in early spring than an obstetrical poem "that speaks even more eloquently of human birth." Strained interpretations like that give Lit. Crit. a bad name. But that failure is soon redeemed by Enid Rhodes Peschel's finely tuned comments on Richard Selzer's sacraments of surgery. Selzer's gothic style is one of the high points of literary medicine in our time, and the essay explores Selzer's Judaeo-Christian roots, his ability to convey the sacred and the profane, and his intense feeling for grace under pressure.

Of the essays dealing with doctors as portrayed in literature, two are of special value. Mary Jean Green's essay on Roger Martin du Gard's chronicle of *Les Thibauts* pays especial attention to one volume in the series titled *The Consultation,* a novel devoted to describing one afternoon in Dr. Antoine Thibault's medical practice, a novel not widely known to American readers, yet one that deserves a wider readership. Marjorie Garber's contribution on physicians in Shakespeare is synoptic, magisterial, and opens many vistas for the physician who will reread Shakespeare in the light of his professional experience, notably those who can concede healing roles to women, cf. Marina in *Pericles,* Cordelia in *King Lear,* or Paulina in *The Winter's Tale.*

The essay most likely to be quoted is Stanley Weintraub's on medicine and the biographer's art. It starts bravely with: "Of the literary genres, biography has most to learn from medicine ... biographers have become sensitive to ... the deepest wellsprings of motive and behavior, but in the process of utilizing psychology, writers often ignore the ills of the flesh for those of the psyche." He calls upon biographers to examine the interaction of physical and psychological illness, a resolution of the mind-body question when applied to a single examined life. Weintraub chooses exemplars from such diverse figures as Lord Randolph Churchill (?tertiary lues), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (chloral addiction, a large hydrocele, too much whiskey, and finally liver and kidney failure), and many others whose lives can profitably be illuminated by medical analysis. (Was Bloody Mary's pseudocyesis purely psychological or was it the result of a virilizing corpus luteum cyst or some other ovarian endocrinopathy?) Equally penetrating is Alan Trachtenberg's analysis of Walt Whitman's

preoccupation with his own body in health and disease, including the final verdict that Whitman was a poet who celebrated physical and mental health.

Not the least value of a book of this sort is that it can serve as motive and cue for a student or a doctor to read the literature, to refresh his memory and mind, to explore the adventures of the literary imagination. The virtues and benefits of humane letters may not be immediately visible, cannot be demonstrated, and certainly cannot be tested, but the doctor who cuts himself off from this form of experience removes himself from an accessible portion of our humanistic tradition and is the poorer for it. A decade or more ago, "enrichment" was a favored word in the bright lexicon of educators. That the word is now out of fashion is our decade's loss. Any medical student or doctor could diagnose Proust's asthma, but only an understanding physician would be able to assess its importance. No one would claim that the future of medicine lies in literature, but without literate doctors that future will be impoverished.

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